

Educating the Military Professional

How should the study of military history impact Marine leaders?

by LTC Jessica M. Farrell, USA

The study of military history is critical to the long-term education of military professionals. Military leaders from GEN George Washington to ADM James Stavridis have made the study of military history central to their professional preparation. Military history informs the way today's Soldiers are trained, the way they fight, and the way they learn. Military history provides examples of strategy, tactics, bravery, victory, and defeat at all echelons. Historic examples allow military professionals to think beyond their personal experience and benefit from what Frederick the Great called a "magazine of military ideas."¹ This article demonstrates the importance of the study of military history at each stage of a military professional's career.

The study of military history prepares military professionals to seize the initiative and be successful in the art of war. A disciplined study of the past during peacetime breeds success in conflict. Frederick the Great constantly studied military history to gain insight into a commander's decision cycle.² Napoleon's ability to foment a revolution in the conduct of war was largely because of his constant study of military history. His knowledge of military history from Thucydides to Gustavus Adolphus allowed Napoleon to creatively capitalize on tactical innovations and optimize his military forces.³ GEN George S. Patton studied the Norman invasion of Sicily to inform his operational decisions in World War II.⁴ Young military officers, overwhelmed by the Sisyphean task of learning the art of war, should gain confidence and inspiration from the examples of the many "Great Cap-

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Marines should study history to gain an understanding of the tactics, techniques, and procedures that make the Marine Corps unique. (Photo by LCpl Luis Zamot.)

tains," who developed military genius by studying military history.⁵

Company grade officers should study military history to develop their knowledge of tactics, leadership principles, and develop a thirst for knowledge.⁶ There is not much space in the curriculum during basic training or the captain's career course for extensive study of military history. Young military professionals must rely on the same methodology as George Washington and Napoleon: self-study. For example, the Maneuver Leader Self-Study Program is an online tutorial that exposes young military professionals to military history and doc-

trine.⁷ The site offers an opportunity to study warfare over time (in width), through deep analysis of specific battles (in depth), while considering the wider political, social, and economic forces at play (in context).⁸ This approach to the study of military history informs the company grade officer's understanding of the battlefield and his role therein.⁹ Military instruction during initial training stages should include an introduction to the Maneuver Leader Self-Study Program as a tool for the life-long study of military history.

Field grade military professionals should use the study of military his-

tory to assist them in effectively making the transition from solving questions of tactics to more complex questions requiring additional creativity, intellect, and judgment.¹⁰ The benefit of military history instruction during the Command and General Staff Officer's Course is the broadening effect it has on students. Military history, in its optimal form, drives observers past parochial concerns and allows for exploration of multiple battlefields from the relative comfort of a library. Though failure has meaningful didactic benefits, it is always less painful and costly to learn from the failures of others. In this way, military history can help fill the inevitable experiential gaps that come with any assignment pattern.

Ideally, military history teaches the field grade officer "how" to think, rather than "what" to think.¹¹ Thus, the study of military history contributes to the formation of adaptive, agile, and flexible military professionals. History is "practicable" in that it yields lessons that military professionals can apply to current problems.¹² For instance, field grade officers grappling with the addition of cyber operations can benefit from exploring how the Union Army optimized the use of new technology: the railroad.¹³ Recognizing the limited technical mastery over railroad management in the ranks, the Union Army relied on civilian expertise to gain success.¹⁴ Based on that example, how would today's military attract civilian talent? Who should be "in charge" of the cyber domain? Does it matter? While not an operational panacea, military history can begin a conversation that informs creative and flexible solutions to complex problems.

At the senior Service level, the study of military history should inform and refine strategic thinking. The United States Army War College educates its graduates to be strategic leaders.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, the study of military history is a major focus at the Army War College. History reveals war as a messy, human endeavor. Successful strategy requires military professionals to roll up their sleeves and enter the mess through a serious study of military history. For example, GEN David H. Petraeus,



Case studies are a valuable method for analyzing historical battles and campaign. (Photo by Cpl Grace L. Waladkewics.)

USA, assembled a team of historians to prepare the counterinsurgency doctrine, acknowledging how critical military history is to the production of effective strategy.¹⁶

There are arguments against the study of military history. Some scholars argue that military history is often misapplied and therefore dangerous. Instead of being explored analytically, military history is often relegated to a virtual experience in which students are simply secondhand observers.¹⁷ Scholars are concerned that such an exercise does not lead to increased capacity for critical thinking, which is presented by many as the primary benefit of the study of military history. In addition, scholars argue that history is inherently fallible because in many cases there are no witnesses or evidence to support a historian's description of historical events.¹⁸ Another argument against the importance of the study of military history is that military professionals can be effective without it. Simply put, anachronistic examples do not inform contemporary military professional skills.

These arguments believe current pedagogical approaches to the study of military history and underestimate its importance. Instructors and students are entrusted to apply the requisite rigor to make the learning process rel-

evant and meaningful. The case study method, used widely in professional military education centers across the Services, provides a framework for analyzing assumptions and paradigms.¹⁹ It is a tool to help military professionals think critically about military history and properly scrutinize the historical information. This practice mitigates the risk of abusing military history by using false analogy or self-serving analysis. Effective military professionals must be adaptive and agile thinkers, relying on their own experience leads to myopia and rigidity. The study of military history compels military professionals to broaden their perspective.

The past is prologue.²⁰ Therefore, the study of military history should remain a linchpin of the life-long education of the military professional. The study of military history allows military professionals to seize the initiative. It teaches them how to think properly at the tactical, operational, and strategic level. Most importantly, it informs agile and adaptive problem-solving skills. Professional military education must emphasize the study of military history at each stage of the military professional's career to produce leaders capable of applying the hard-won lessons of the past to an increasingly complex world.

Notes

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2. "Frederick the Great: The Education of a Great Captain," in *The John Biggs Cincinnati Lectures in Military Leadership and Command*, (Lexington, VA: The VMI Foundation, 1987); reprinted in the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, *H100 Syllabus and Book of Readings* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC).
3. "Military History: Is It Still Practicable?"
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. H.R. McMaster, "On the Study of War and Warfare," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, (Online: February 2017).

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9. Ibid.
10. Carl von Clausewitz, "On the Theory of War," in *On War*, edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).
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13. Christopher R. Gabel, "Railroad Generalship: Foundations of Civil War Strategy," (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1997); reprinted in the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, *H100 Syllabus and Book of Readings*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC), H108RA-250.
14. Ibid.

15. This information is available at the *United States Army War College*, (Online).
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18. Ibid.
19. Christine Gross-Loh, "A Better Way to Teach History," *The Atlantic*, (Online: February 2016).
20. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, edited Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004).



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